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The Passion and the Play of a Libertarian Artist: Ayn Rand, 1905–1982

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History knows few ironies so precious as that we are about to recount: a corollary or sub-set actually, of the broader irony that Soviet Communism, by its victory over Germany on the eastern front in World War II, saved modern capitalism from certain defeat.[1] Two decades earlier (1921), in confiscating the pharmacy of Zinovy Rosenbaum in St. Petersburg, Nicolai Lenin created a formidable nemesis in the person of the chemist's young collegian daughter, who would lose no time finding her way to the propaganda mill of Hollywood, from where she would contribute mightily to the external assault on the Russian utopian "experiment" and the philosophical assumptions of "altruism and collectivism."

Zinovy's daughter, Alyssa Zinovievna Rosenbaum (after 1927, Ayn Rand), may be the most significant and popular Russian thinker of the past century. A spirited opponent of socialism and a critic of the Russian traditions that inspired the Revolution, she sold more books (over 50 million copies in a dozen languages) than her rivals and produced Hollywood screenplays, reaching probably more minds than Lenin or Stalin, Pasternak or Solzenitzen, and currently has a larger following in the United States than Engels or Marx. Indeed, more Westerners have read *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, or viewed the film based on the former, than ever consumed the most widely read Russian litterateur—Tolstoy. Indirectly at least, Rand's quirky contribution to philosophy, known as Objectivism, enjoys more current attention than the "Philosophical Manuscripts" of Marx. As recently as 1991 a Library of Congress survey of books that most influenced readers' lives reported that *Atlas Shrugged* followed only the Bible. A century after her birth, Ayn Rand continues to cast a long shadow over contemporary American society. She was the mentress of millions of college students during the later 1950s through the 1980s. She is the godmother of the growing Libertarian Party, although she dissociated herself from that movement and all other "-isms" but Objectivism. Her intimate and disciple Alan Greenspan, close advisor to five presidents and currently chairman of the American Federal Reserve Bank and setter of interest rates, confides that he continues

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periodically to read *Atlas Shrugged*.[2] Her ideas have recently experienced a renaissance. She has had four biographers in the past decade; a film featuring her personal life, released in 1999 by Sundance Studios, has been well received.

Though the Cold War was brought to closure in the 1980s by both Soviet contradictions and American wealth and military profligacy, the ideological battle was already won by the capitalist monopoly of global media and the disciplining of American artists/writers sympathetic to mythic socialism from the 1920s to the 1950s.[3] Hollywood, the hearth of the film medium, welcomed and engaged the services of the youthful, aspiring counter-revolutionary scenarist Alyssa Rosenbaum in 1926. The right thing at the right time—an ambitious, thoroughly desperate, seemingly right-wing ideologue in the persona of a non-threatening young girl, Alyssa/Ayn immediately won the patronage of Cecil B. DeMille and launched thereby a legendary if tortuous career. Her propitious arrival and acceptance in the rarified circles of screen writing is all the more remarkable in view of the fact she could not write English when she emigrated in 1926. (But then neither had Laemmle, Goldwyn, Mayer, Selznik, Wyler, Zukor, Cohn, Warner, or Schary ever seen a cowboy or Indian—and several arrived without English.) Rand's reception in the Jewish society of Hollywood is a matter as yet uncharted, but worthy of study. Like the others, Rand set about mythologizing America in print and on screen while redesigning herself; "The Hollywood Jews," says Gabler, "created a powerful cluster of images and ideas—so powerful that, in a sense, they colonized the American imagination. . . . American values came to be defined largely by the movies the Jews made."[4]

Ayn Rand and her work must appeal to any who groove on the anomalies of transnational, transgendered, postmodern society. In this one individual all the contradictions, stresses, and repressions of Western angst are expressed in formal, explicit texts and films. Her following was derived not from professional philosophers, litterateurs, and penseurs, but from among middle class and affluent testosteronish postwar college and not a few adolescent high school readers. Her polemical novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) assured her a place in modern American literature and social thought. More formal discourse on the social ideas advanced in the novels appeared later in her journal, *The Objectivist* (1966–1971).

Rand's very gradual popular acceptance was no triumph easily won, and little was known of her identity or the background that inspired her passionate, improbable dialogues. Here we have a woman who, though apotheosizing brave, independent *Übermenchen*, resided in the fertile crescent of feminism (New York) and married a docile puppy of a man; who made her agnostic mark in a largely fundamentalist Christian country; who, though an artist, extolled the wonders of science and industrial technology; who, though a European, spent her life promoting the individualist stream in the Anglo-American character and culture; and who, though Jewish, passed her entire adult life with an Irish Catholic spouse. Though a Russian immigrant, she began, soon on arrival in

America, producing Hollywood screen plays; and, though a female artist and fictionalist, she deplored the American Left and made her mark with the right-wing majority.

La vie en rose?

Alyssa Rosenbaum was born in 1905 at St. Petersburg, Russia's Paris, to Jewish parents, a chemist father and a mother who taught secondary school languages. Raised in a large, extended group, Alyssa was driven by an experience she never revealed, and without which she would not exist. A sensitive, introspective, adolescent middle-class girl of 12 in 1917, she saw the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in February of that year, followed by the Bolshevik coup in October, and her first matinee idol was not Frank Sinatra but Alex Kerensky. Her father's pharmacy was confiscated by the Bolsheviks, and her family, terrorized and purged, was forced into several years of "exile" in the Crimea, as was the family of Vladimir Nabokov.[5] Before departure south, Sciabarra speculates, she may have been studying at the Stoiunin Gymnasium in 1917–1918, where her mentor would have been the renowned neoidealist and classicist, N. O. Lossky. In Odessa, Alyssa studied through high school. The personal loss she experienced as a result of mass political hysteria, she associated with the deficiencies of a culture mired in hierarchy, caste, sentimentality, superstition, malevolence—irrationality. The idea that a new mass state would soothe the pains of autocratic old Russia seemed to her anomalous, indeed malicious and demagogic. Stalin later showed her to be optimistic.

For escape, she imagined America, through silent films and O. Henry's stories, as a land where the political culture of individual expression and the self-made man countered the utopian madness and institutionalized persecutions and murders that soon followed Lenin's new order. After three years her family returned to St. Petersburg, where she resumed her studies in philosophy. Alyssa was exposed, in a probably haphazard fashion, to ideas and personae at the chaotic state university that would profoundly influence her thinking. While she was studying in 1922, Ptirim Sorokin was there, coining the theory of "creative altruism" so well-received later at Harvard. Perhaps recalling him in St. Petersburg, she later derided him as "a thoroughly Russian mystic altruist." As a student Rand was exposed to a catalogue of great Russian thinkers: Plotonov, Tarle, Grevs, and especially Karsavin. She never mentioned later on any of these contacts or personae. A typical neo-American, she was hard at work inventing herself. By the time of her graduation in 1924, she had been exposed to a range of dialectical discourse that formed her project. She falls fully within Russian literary and philosophical criticism, having absorbed a mountain of Nietzschean and Hegelian thought. She drank from three cups: the then current symbolist movement, the Orthodox Renaissance, and Russian Marxism, all of which sought to resolve discrepancies of Western philosophical speculation.

Having decided on a career as a novelist expounding philosophical ideas in her last year of university, upon graduation with honors she nevertheless began film school amidst the dynamic florescence of Russian culture that accompanied the charismatic phase of the Revolution. Photos of the time suggest she was pleased with the prospects of film. She also worked as a tour guide and imagined other worlds. In 1925 her relatives in Chicago arranged a six month travel visa for her, and she was quickly off, spending her 21st birthday with a cousin in Berlin, then moving on to Paris, which did not impress her, contrary to the experience of so many Russian émigrés. Arriving at New York after a long voyage from le Havre in February of 1926, she had rejected already religion (even the Communist party), God, and the Collective. She was engrossed by the phenomenon of "mass man" as dissected in Ortega y Gasset's critical *La rebelión de la masas* (1927). New York struck her like nothing else in America. Transfixed by the skyscrapers and the symbols of capitalism's power, she humbled herself before mammon and dedicated her life to its maintenance and expansion. Next came Chicago, where her butcher shop–owning relatives arranged an introduction to Cecil B. DeMille, whom she approached in the summer of 1926.

Though she thereafter became a best-selling writer, her published work is only the tip of the iceberg. Her work on *The Objectivist* newsletter was more intellectually substantial—even heroic. George Gilder's "altruistic entrepreneur" is a gloss on Objectivism, and one of its spin-offs was the American neoconservative movement since the 1970s.

There are at least two personae attached to the name Ayn Rand. In fact, the extreme disparity of perception between her fans and detractors suggests a thinker who could decisively strike the fault lines of her adopted society. The cover of Barbara Branden's biography displays an early, haunting photo, evoking an exotic beauty, a sort of Eurasian Blessed Virgin. The cover of Jeff Walker's critical study depicts an aging witch-like specter, with jagged teeth, black circles around the eyes, and the ubiquitous cigarette-in-holder. If we could explain how these images might be projected by the same individual, we might achieve sharper assessment of this exceptional character. Likewise, Walker's negative study contrasts sharply with the philosophical portrait by Peter Erickson. Both these works are of high quality, though Walker rejects altogether Erickson's assertion that "no writer is perfect; but this one was one of the luminaries of the 20th century."[6]

But seeming contradictions only begin there. She called herself a "male chauvinist," glorified male personae in the novels, but experienced very few and very odd relations with men, though she did enjoy a long, stable marriage. The construction of her identity is thoroughly anomalous. Though Jewish, she avoided all reference to her background or antecedents. She took her name from the typewriter company (or from the South African currency?) and was sometimes assumed by readers and public to be a snobbish Anglo. Yet Jewish identity is essential to her performance, not only as a secular (atheistic) humanist, but to

her thoroughly messianic tour-de-force a la Marx, Freud, Lenin, Kerensky, Trotsky and so many others. In brief, she sprang directly, organically, from the very culture complex she repudiated. Following her successes she even encouraged and developed after 1951, what some critics consider a cult around her person, akin to the "inner circle" that fawned upon the early Stalin. The psychological resemblance between Rand's "cult" and the party vanguard of the early Revolution in terms of totalitarian premises, enforced orthodoxy, obligatory self-criticism, and the violent ejection of faltering aspirants from the inner circle both disturbs and clarifies.[7] Rand was as abstemiously middle class, fastidious, doctrinaire, and as adamantly self-realizing as Lenin ever aspired to be.

Her life from 1926 to 1943 was arduous. Though a self-styled avatar of "reason," her modus operandi was, following her biographers, utterly self-defeating. She was not the first public figure to preach one thing and live another. In 1929 she selected a husband for his good looks (her visa had expired) and lived always in an idyllic future. With her faithful husband she struggled doggedly through the Depression, taking work as a waitress and summarizer of scripts. She did construction-site research for De Mille's *Skyscraper* (1928), but also lost jobs and time as did most Americans. She found the energy to hobnob with a range of fringe right-wingers—Albert Nock, Rose Wilder, and Isabel Patterson—who, while mentors, generally misunderstood her.

All the while she wrote plays, novellas, and plans for novels: "Red Pawn" (a screenplay for Universal, 1932); *The Night of January 16th* (a Broadway success, 1934); *We the Living* (a novella, 1936); *Anthem* (1938); *The Fountainhead* (novel, 1943; film, 1949); *Atlas Shrugged* (1957); *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964); *Capitalism, the Unknown Ideal* (1966); *The Objectivist* (1962–1971). *Atlas Shrugged*, which did not resonate so widely as *The Fountainhead*, elaborated the same themes. These two works are ponderous, jammed with very long speeches, and intricate in their planning. They required immense and exhausting efforts of their author. Her social panorama resembles a "dodgem" course strewn with continually colliding and mutually contradictory propositions. She was inured to pain of every sort, and kept doggedly at the typewriter, accompanied by her silent husband, a cat, and a bizarre menu of chocolates, pastries, and cigarettes.

Though she craved literary success, she was not craven. She steadfastly made her way, and on her own terms. The totalitarian effect of concentrated capital and media-manipulated pseudo-political events in her adopted country (then only in the planning stages) she seems never to have noticed. The Janus-faced American empire, painfully unveiled by the Vietnam War, was apparently invisible to her. Neither her creative works nor her philosophical schema take account of the fatal transformation of the society she lauded. Her work seems, aesthetically and politically, arrested in the 1930s. The many letters she wrote home indicate a continued, albeit private involvement with Russia, and perhaps (understandably) a fixation with Stalin.[8]

Rand is a bold, disquieting thinker. Though she became slowly, painstakingly, a remarkable success and even a cult figure of the Libertarian-Republican wing from the 1950s through the 1970s—appearing on popular talk shows into the 1980s and attracting huge crowds wherever she spoke—from her arrival in 1926 she was knowingly up against the chic leftism of the American literati and film crowd, who viscerally rejected counterrevolutionary tracts, as they saw her first (*We the Living*, 1934) and subsequent novels. New York's Jewish Old Left, having its heyday during the 1920s and 1930s, dismissed her out of hand as a counter-revolutionary ideologue. Yet, her closest followers were mainly Jewish. This division within American intellectual Jewry persists today, though the right has turned the tables on the "left."[9]

Rand was the oddest of personae, concealing her Russian and Jewish heritage, ignoring (publicly) her relatives in St. Petersburg and Chicago, taking a nom-de-plume from the brand name of her typewriter, aspiring to write intricate plots in a foreign language, reading very little while formulating a "philosophy" articulated dramatically through the voice of aggressive, individualist male characters. Her messianic mission always in focus, if she could not rescue Russia, she would try to save the U.S.A. from (a largely imaginary) Christian altruism. Her frustration was that Americans did not recognize the marvel of freedom and abundance they took for granted, and by accepting the New Deal and "creeping socialism" would squander this rare historical development.

In her writing she was also developing a framework for a sort of hybrid philosophy. This "system" included a theory of practice, as well as an ethics and a theory of action. This schema in social practice took the form of a posture known as Objectivism, a variety of materialism. When applied in personal life and work, however, it seemed to serve mainly as an obstacle to her social and artistic integration. Her style in interpersonal relations seemed drawn from her favorite writers—the great romantic sentimentalists Rostand and Victor Hugo. Preoccupied as she was with larger-than-life dramatic figures, with sci-fi heroes and heroines, real humans rarely measured up to her rigid expectations. But humanity in the abstract appealed to her, as we see from the wooden figures in *We the Living* (1933), a tale of "man against the state," the writing of which she later declared, "finally got Russia out of her system."[10] She saw the Revolution as a product of the Russian mythic past, of a Russian culture that glorified the tragic and malevolent. In *We the Living*, begun in 1930, she depicts the horrors of statism in Russia. Oddly, her intended effect in that work only caught on 30 years later. It was *The Fountainhead*, her first major novel, that finally made her mark and made her famous. Almost two decades of misery were behind her when she sold the film rights for the then princely sum of $50,000.

Fountainhead's composition required 15 years, as she devotedly labored in low-paying jobs to support her unsuccessful actor husband. Her scenarios emerged from first-hand experience and early exposure to American silent films. Her animus doubtless derived from exposure to the folkloric, lemming-like,

tragic, self-victimizing, malevolent popular psychology of the Russian masses, together with an assumption that the apotheosis of mathematical reason in modern science applied also to political and social affairs. Her real value is her unique contribution to literature: the creation, however ungainly, of scenarios and dialogues in which to project and adumbrate her pet social ideas. She is not the first to write political fiction, but one of the most explicit and transparently propagandizing.

Disappointment and frustration were her lifelong diet. Fearing the "leftism" of Roosevelt, she stumped tirelessly for Henry Wallace in 1940, encouraged by what she perceived as the virtue and common sense of her working class listeners, who appeared in droves and applauded wildly. A passive campaigner, Wallace proved a letdown. The intellectual limitations of the Republicans and of all defenders of capitalism astounded her. Also during that election year occurred the horrific German siege of Leningrad (St. Petersburg), in which fifty percent of the inhabitants, and most of her family, perished. Privately, she was never to shake her intimate connection to the October Revolution and its legacy—the Cold War. This singular event gave rise in the West to both new welfare systems to parry the broad workers' movements and extreme forms of Manichean binary thought. In her adopted country, the state concocted brutal covert imperialist projects which came to public attention only in the 1960s. But her Russian education apparently failed to illuminate her political analyses. She did not grasp the West's all out aggressive posture vis-à-vis the failing Soviet utopia, and she entirely missed the singular role of the U.S. in leading that campaign.[11]

Rand's Literature

Rand's novels speak from and to a world in which the Western and American response to the October Revolution that sent her to Hollywood is not taken into account. Her literary world is not only fictitious but unreal. The aggressive American empire whose media employed her does not exist anywhere on her pages, or apparently in her consciousness. Ayn Rand's writing is designed only secondarily as literature. She did not aspire to create the "great American novel"—whatever that is. Her interest is ideology, polemic, and propaganda. Her unappealing characters have a transparently didactic purpose. She also liked to shock readers, part of the melodrama she absorbed in early Hollywood, with such titles as "The Virtue of Selfishness," which led to her unnecessary and ill-founded vilification by liberals and religious publicists. She provoked a squall of invective and indignant criticism and the general rejection of the Christian humanist wing of academia and arts following the appearance of the film version of *The Fountainhead* (1949). Most reviewers of her fiction found fault with her thin character development, though her personae were essentially vehicles for political ideas and she had no intention of creating literary personalities—no

objects of social or humanistic concern. Her American readers—and she was one of the more widely read writers of the past century—seldom discerned that her work was a direct response to the more recent Russian past, or ever realized what specific agenda was carrying her thought along.

Romantic influences so common to classic Russian writers permeate Rand's ideas and literary characters, who are always ideal types, rather than ambivalent, ambiguous, flawed personae. She claimed that Victor Hugo was "the single greatest influence on her work." But actually Nietzsche, as with most Western philosophers of her generation and since, is her most serious influence. This means that she is the heir of Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Spengler, none of whom she referenced or acknowledged. As Walker cogently demonstrates, she drew freely from this tradition (of her school days) as well as from American pop literature of the half century preceding her arrival in Chicago (also unacknowledged). But "art" is never original and Rand's posture was more egotistical than dishonest. Her work took a huge toll on her time and health, and whatever its eclectic genesis, it intuitively moved readers.

When Rand finally concluded *The Fountainhead* in 1942, it was rejected by a dozen publishers. Her anti-liberal bias was the most evident obstacle, but the youthful personal experience that animated her was utterly unavailable to Americans, whether editors or masses. Moreover, such preoccupations as hers were far from accessible within the narrow confines of American mass culture. For example, her film of *The Fountainhead* contains Roark's long soliloquy condemning collectivism. This sequence was utterly anomalous to American consumers, whose only experience with property was straightforward private ownership. There existed no referent to alternative or competing land tenure archetypes. In a society of private property holders, Rand's obsessions did not always register. That she got such speeches past film producers or audiences indicates her passion and influence. Though the former had no notion of the subject or its context, Rand was able (despite her complaints to the contrary) to muscle her main ideas through the film process, and reviewers accepted, occasionally positively, both her books and films—despite faint understanding of the ideological backdrop to her scenarios. Her lines, quite naturally in retrospect, seem crafted for, destined for, Russian and Eastern European audiences. Still, her stories, arguments, and media products found a niche in American readerly and entertainment circles—proof that "being there" was everything.

She sought out and exchanged views with the conservative or rightwing notables of the day, on both coasts, but found them unprepared utterly to defend American capitalism, to argue it from a positive, philosophical, and ethical angle. Adam Smith needed updating and Americanizing in a way she found wanting. This was in fact the case, but the postwar American domestic economic boom obviated much theorizing. She felt that hers was the solitary role of theorizing and rationalizing capitalist development. But she seems not to have considered Max Weber or the fundamentalist substrate of American life. Having

lived only in Hollywood and Manhattan, two of the more deviant national subcultures, and within an exceedingly narrow social sphere, she had no real contact with the American masses and no first-hand experience with the mentalités of the South or Southwest, for example. Her America was the world of Frank Lloyd Wright, Clifton Fadiman, and Ogden Nash. But when Alyssa landed in New York, some 98% of Americans claimed to believe in the God of the Bible, which book was also their literature. During her year in film school, her last in Russia, the Scopes trial took place (1925). Had Rand recognized the implications of that drama, she might have produced a quite different literature.[12] She obviously never grasped the multi-class varieties of the Protestant guilt mechanism that both framed American thought and sentiment and drove American productivity. Immersed in the dualism of Russian orthodoxy and fatalistic folk-psychology, she missed the deep Manicheanism of her fantasized adopted land—Protestant America—where a smile, a handshake, and a biblical phrase customarily preceded a personal betrayal (a swindle) or a wholesale one (a bombing).[13] What did she think was the Volstead Act?[14] The most excessive dictatorships have never erected such a monument to infantilism.

Despite the repressive mechanism at work in the society she entered in the 1920s—apparent certainly to Rand as to any immigrant—and the demographic significance of Christian fundamentalism, her atheistic work found its audience. That is, children entering college after the War and through the 1960s, often from fundamentalist backgrounds, enjoyed her scenarios, characters, and ideals, perhaps because she chose to ignore or not consider the facts around her. The drag that marked her rise to popular acceptance is explained by the two-edged sword she wielded. On one hand she seemed a humanist, abolishing all obstacles to individual realization and fulfillment (Renaissance). But by sweeping aside all religion and conventional post-Victorian morality for a secular ethics, she made many traditionalist opponents (as did Voltaire and the French Revolution).

Her work rather reinvents the wheel. She would have been well served to study more and write less. A close friend noted that "She was never a voracious reader, and as the years passed she read less and less."[15] Her issues had been already debated from antiquity to the present by a catalogue of distinguished thinkers, all of whom she dismissed as misguided. She took neither Russian nor English literature seriously. An acquaintance with Spinoza, for example, could have saved her much trouble, not to mention knowledge of the perceptive French analysts of the American scene: St. Jean Crevecoeur, Latrobe, and Tocqueville, with whom Marx had concurred. She saw America as the product of the minds of its great, enlightened founders (she would have identified with Tom Paine, had she studied him) and seemed naively unaware that the Robber Barons had already hijacked the economy. America is the only developed country to vest ownership of the national resources in private hands—and that transfer transpired before World War I. Her "productive," "self-realizing" "men of mind and action" had converted Jefferson's little agrarian commonwealth into an imperi-

alist class society whose logic could not sustain communities, moved millions of hapless employees all over the map, undermined family farms and businesses, bred an extensive urban criminal class, criminalized organized labor, and found its motor in warfare, weaponry, espionage, and neocolonialism. Jefferson and his yeomen farmers were trumped, but Rand either never saw reality, or ignored it in favor of the industrial utopia of her private imaginary. Edgar Hoover stalked a constitutional democracy. Though not the equal of Lavrenti Beria, he was more powerful and long-lived, and was never remotely brought to justice. Beria at least got his comeuppance.[16]

Ayn Rand composed memorable, painfully-wrought lines and lengthy soliloquies that quite overload her novels and films. Despite the heavy-handedness, however, her indefatigable spirit and ability to articulate her position ("the individual persona must be not impaired in its self-realization by mediocre institutions and mass lethargy and viciousness"—a truism pithily posed) slowly won out. Between her formidable persona and her startlingly simple (and oversimplified) formulations, she frightened many people in Hollywood, in publishing, and especially in politics. But her influence was always marginal because she misread the topos. She railed against socialism and collectivism in a society that knew of neither, but rather was making its accommodation to the empire of consumption, to the ruling class's quality world.[17] In *The Fountainhead*, Ellsworth Toohey, the nemesis of the hero, Roark, is speaking with a capitalist who says: "I don't care about art or architecture. I play the stock market." Replies Toohey: "I play the stock market of the spirit, and I sell short."

Rand's education was deficient for the purpose she set herself. She read little and very narrowly (detective novels) and indicates slight grasp of economic issues that were vital to her arguments. She made no reference to contemporary imperialism or comparative economic development—either of which would have allowed her to construct her stories and social theories more convincingly. She also misunderstood the reformist thrust of both the British labor movement and the American welfare state. These were key strategies—the Labour Party and the New Deal—without which the laboring masses would likely have launched a serious offensive against the Robber Baron bourgeoisies still surviving from the previous century in both countries. The political subtleties of maintaining capitalist institutions/privileges in the face of the upheavals of the 1920s and through World War II were completely lost on Ayn Rand. She lived generally in private isolation from the environment and understood little about American society—as indicated in her bizarre screen writing. Moreover, unlike many of her more astute entertainment business colleagues, she showed no awareness of the potential of mass entertainment to substitute for coercive statism in the containment, diversion, and subversion of mass unrest and protest. While she struggled sincerely to educate the masses concerning the corruption of individual and market freedoms, the media were learning to put the public to sleep.

To her credit, she was contemptuous of both the political right and the liberal

regime, though with a little effort on her part the right could have enriched and canonized her. Even her most demanding early critic admitted that

> Miss Rand has demonstrated remarkable restraint by making no attempt to court favor with established right wing groups and has consistently refused to ameliorate her singularly unorthodox opinions with respect to race, religion, and country—opinions which are scarcely designed to elicit vast enthusiasm in most "conservative" circles. [She has been] a useful intellectual catalyst in a society which suffers from philosophical "tired blood."[18]

Philosophy: Randism

> My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.[19]

Recent studies of Rand's thought and works begin to suggest an image entirely at variance with that of critics and opponents since the 1930s. According to Chris Sciambarra, Rand's essential achievement is her alternative method (to Hegel and Marx), which "redeems the integrity of dialectic as a radical method by rescuing it from its mystical, collectivist, statist incarnation."[20] An heir of Russian dialectical thinking, via the "young Hegelians," Rand sought systematically to resolve the contradictions, to merge the dichotomies, and to synthesize the polarities of Western economic and social thought. This is a tall order, and if she has achieved it only partially, she deserves a legitimate critique.

In what sense may Rand be considered a contributor to modern radical thought or to the dialectical revolt against formal dualism? She integrates a libertarian politics with a dialectical philosophical method—producing, thereby, a radical non-Marxist critique of the state. An heiress of the Revolution, her main preoccupation is power relations in modern statist society, and one by which her work transcends the American milieu in which she thought, wrote, and struggled. But at the same time, this critique of the state would require her to consider the state's modern components: early state formation, economic classes, colonialism, race, imaginary communities—which she largely avoids. She cannot have failed to hear of gangsters, Indian reservations, and lynchings—phenomena that reside on the flip side of the liberal bourgeois state apparatus. Though she finds the state inflated, overbearing, and "out of control," Rand is caught in a near carnivalesque contradiction: capital has been in charge of big government for centuries.[21] In fact, the very nexus of big government and media (film and print) itself created Rand's own role and provided her an alternative life.

Two themes are particularly prominent in Rand's oeuvre: her theory of personality, based on a primitive notion of "free will," manifest in the single-minded, heroic *Übermenschen* she created; and her direct association of capitalism with American individualism. Dismissing Freud out of hand—

ironically a general tendency of the radical "Left"—she overlooked the role of the unconscious in individual or mass behavior, rendering her dramatic treatment of the theme of "man against the state" somewhat wooden, unempathetic, and unappealing. Her insistence that industrial America marked a high point in the evolution of *homo economicus* was naive and inattentive to exemplary alternative cases of capitalist florescence: early Mediterranean commercial capitalism, Chinese imperial achievements, and 19th-century developments in Japan and the Arab world. That Asian variants of industrial capitalism showed the Western cult of the individual to be unnecessary to economic development, she seemed not to recognize.[22]

Her central concern was that "creeping socialism" or welfare state policies in Britain and America threatened democratic freedom, individual development, and material progress. Her frustration was that Americans did not recognize the marvel of freedom and abundance they took for granted, and with the New Deal and creeping socialism would squander this rare historical development. She sought to dramatize these issues before a wide audience through fictional characters. Though her central idea seems eminently commonsensical, and attracted conservative followers nationwide, it ultimately suffers the fate of all monotheories. After all, the past half century has proved that the North Atlantic capitalist hegemon could deftly survive confrontation and could coopt/forestall popular eruption from within (a) by generating abstract enemies without (unwanted immigration, godless Communism, theocratic terrorism), and (b) by proper and sufficient subsidies combined with round-the-clock entertainment. Rand never acknowledged the comparable historic success of the post-capitalism of her own age.

Rand defies philosophical and political classification; despite popular perception and pedestrian journalism devoted to her work, she cannot be accurately classified as a "right" ideologue, since she saw her mission and developed her thought from European experiences and sources outside the simple dichotomies of American political discourse. As a counterrevolutionary she is outside the parameters of American ideology—where social revolution is not a meaningful category. Her social and intellectual background in messianic Judaism, the Russian struggle against feudalism, and the draconian experience of Leninism, were/are simply not accessible to the public in her adopted land.

"Objectivism," the ideology behind both her popular and "philosophical" works, is a response to the absurdities and abuses she saw in Bolshevism, Leninism, the Collective model, bureaucracy, purges, and terror. Rather than reaching a conclusion, her Objectivist system is dynamic, relational, contextual. Her posture is also critical of the Russian popular psychology of fatalism, dependency on autocratic leadership, and Orthodox mysticism. Rand's Objectivism is in no wise a formal philosophy—it impresses no real intellects. What makes Rand phenomenal is her end run around the intellectual establishment in America and her appeal directly to the audiences she preferred: a broad sample of the public,

especially later adolescents floundering in the throes of identity and orientation crises. To the youthful and confounded she provided an order, an apparently comprehensive "system" by which to explain and evaluate all issues.

For a writer so categorically foreign, Jewish, female, contra-feminist, avowedly secular, anti-Christian, atheist, and socially bizarre to connect over decades with vast enthusiastic audiences in a society demographically religious/fundamentalist and unfamiliar with the world outside North America is no small achievement. This was possible because her ideas resonate with everyday people, and her stories derive from models already circulating though American society for a century. Walker illustrates convincingly that she was steeped in the probusiness literature and propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s—from which she drew freely.[23] Uyl and Rasmussen agree that she was devoid of any "system," but succeeded in emphasizing, in a unique artistic method, perennial ideas of autonomy, agency, and fulfillment.[24] Her understudy and heir (before she broke with him in 1968), Nathaniel Branden, produced a book that transformed her ideas into a self-help movement: *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*.[25] How Branden developed his theory under the tutelage of Rand would make a fascinating story.

To her credit, Rand, unlike her Hollywood colleagues, did not labor to achieve wealth and to pacify or entertain audiences through the usual cheap manipulations in vogue. She sought to oversee the stage and film production of her plays and novels, requiring strict adherence to her thoughts and ideas. She put her political message above material requirements of entertainment, and often paid dearly. That she sacrificed her material advancement to principle during the Depression and hard times may be her real legacy.

That she stood firmly for serious ideas and braved hardship to bring them to an unwilling public already taken by the seductions of Hollywood is tragically Russian, and an existential posture more truly radical than any of her pet theories or the behavior of her spineless colleagues. Rand was a truly remarkable thinker and character, one who asked no help from any quarter and stood alone for her pet social ideas in a society of the most abject relativist psychology and practice. Her followers were not worthy of their leader, who refused compromise of her ideals through the perils of emigration and a rough Depression economy.

Though her ideas have little appeal to the sentimentalist side of the American character, they in fact influenced the domestic political environment in profound ways: everything from the anarchy of the 1990s and the Federal Reserve czar himself, to the rationale of current "globalism." Ayn Rand was way ahead of the curve, and deserves more serious attention from both academic thinkers and students of American pop culture.

To argue that Western capitalism, the American variant in particular, best facilitates individual achievement, involves several premises. Those Ayn Rand did not closely examine. The value of the rational over the mystical is not self-evident, or a priori. Nor does this assumption require anything like a "philoso-

phy." Calculated self-interest was worked over by Hobbes in *Leviathan*, and to a degree Hume and Locke, whom Rand draws on indirectly, without acknowledging (as she never acknowledged the immediate sources of her literary oeuvre in business literature of the 1920s).

Academic philosophy ignored Rand, and vice-versa. Her case is that of a rare specimen—a highly driven popular writer (the novels share much with science-fiction cartoons of the 1930s) purporting to espouse a unique philosophy, operating in isolation from like minds. Her odd persona and her very strict observance of certain idealistic social values precluded much congress with academia, which she perceived as the servant of a decadent, liberal, mushy, self-destructive state. In fact, the American state, for Rand, was no likely guardian or patron of capitalist values, and neither the bourgeoisie nor masses of Americans could recognize or appreciate the unusual freedom they enjoyed.

Despite her guise as a neo-American, she remained primarily a Russian thinker. Rand was concerned with the resolution or synthesis of schizophrenic, Manichean dualisms that have suffused Western ideologies. This preoccupation did not originate with her, but was a staple of traditional radical Russian thought, stimulated no doubt by nearby German intellectual ferment through much of the 19th century. That she was able to make her concerns the concerns of Americans is a tribute as much to her dogged naivete as to her beliefs.

Pop Cult Icon

Rand is where pop culture, science-fiction, and social philosophy meet. From her beginnings in Hollywood, her libertarian posture attracted a following—of highly individualistic, secular, free-thinking self-starters. Most were Jewish, as was Rand, whose secular Utopia served the traditional function of religion among her groupies and slowly found wide appeal, mainly among college students.

Rand did not until recently escape the confines of her Objectivist cult to attract the study she deserves. Book and film reviewers nearly always misconstrued her ideas, film-makers uniformly sought to alter her words and characters in practical conformity with viewer expectations, and despite a life of conviction, sacrifice, and disparagement in defense of her political and moral principles, she is even today reviled by the "liberal establishment" for a supposedly atheistic, egotistic, antisocial hyper-individualism.

The truth is somewhere else. When stripped of her sensationalist, "skewer the bourgeoisie" rhetoric and awkwardly constructed fictional characters, Rand was more than the neo-conservatives' conservative. She understood and enshrined classic "natural rights," and was boldly non-elitist or populist, often praising the working masses, who heard her speeches for Henry Wallace in 1940. Unlike her Hollywood masters, she maintained faith in the capacity of the masses to comprehend her various messages. She expressed revulsion at the pandering, leveling, dumbing-down presentation of serious issues in American films, and

single-handedly sought to bring her theories to the masses in direct, honest fashion. While her colleagues in entertainment discovered the open-ended capacity of their media to enthrall and stupefy the masses into inertia, Rand, to her credit, insisted on the use of her art as a tool of enlightenment, instruction, and political education.

But what astonishes is not the corporeal and intellectual Rand so much as the industry generated around her cult. Rand disliked intellectuals and academe. She had worked as a waitress and maid and knew the struggles of the immigrant working class. The fact that her following developed spontaneously, outside any institutional framework, made her message appear far more odd than it is. She was uncomfortable in her adopted home, for reasons not very clear to her biographers.

Rand the cultural icon is distinctive, first, for the fact that pop art is rarely produced by conservative critics of liberalism. Second, though she thought of herself as a philosopher, she never acquired academic acceptance. Third, few right ideologues have ever expressed faith in the sense and capabilities of common people. This is supposed to be the position of liberal democrats, whose amorphous cynicism and corruption in America Rand was the first to recognize and boldly attack. Rand was much closer to Marx than her nemesis, Lenin, though she shared much of his ascetic self-righteous intolerance for all but *her* truths. Unlike Lenin and like Marx, she truly believed that the proletariat, given sufficient exposure, guidance, and education, could aspire to moral and intellectual, as well as economic, independence. She was intolerant of liberal paternalism and the cloying sentimentality that has always masked the raw barbarism and self-interest of America's brand of capitalism. Rand was above all a tireless, honest, and sincere seeker of truth, regardless of her narrow learning and personal deficiencies. She was just one among a wave of immigrants to American shores between 1880 and 1920, without whom American pop and high culture would still consist of a banjo and cornbread.

Conclusion

Alyssa Rosenbaum was not the only Russian émigré in the U.S., but she was the one who distilled the experience of social upheaval, dispossession, displacement, and dehumanization onto the printed page and sought to reach Americans with the tragic lessons of the October Revolution and the "ten days that shook the world."[26] Her assumption that the "Collectivist" panacea of the Bolshevik regime apotheosized the state at the expense of individual autonomy and development (which it did), and that the creeping welfare state of FDR tended to evolve toward a similar arrangement (which it did not)—imbues all her work.

What makes Rand's experience and career so compelling is her position between the contrary tendencies of American society that issued from the capi-

talist project's confrontation with the Russian Revolution. In Rand's life-long view, the American public never appreciated the realities of socialist statism in practice, and to her continued frustration (until her death in 1982) capitalist elites persisted in a naive, uncritical paranoia (bordering on hope?) vis-à-vis the Communist quest for utopia. Though the practice of Russian socialism was decried generally—once Stalinist excesses such as mass murders and deportations surfaced—its goals were not questioned by some liberal, often academic, sectors of the American elite. While the Old Left persistently saw successive American administrations and corporate elites aligned in dogged opposition to reforms and experiments following the hysteria of 1917, Rand was appalled at the countervailing sympathy toward socialism of many "limousine liberals" among her colleagues in the media. Her purpose quickly became that of a propagandist for "free enterprise" and libertarian politics. She constructed herself a cold warrior nearly two decades before the Cold War.

In retrospect, because Rand had personally experienced the diminishment of the individual under a rigid statist bureaucratic regime, it was not unreasonable for her to fear the headlong bureaucratization she saw accompany the growth of the American state following World War II. Though her literary works spawned a mystique and cultish admiration, they were also a practical and natural response to her personal experience of bureaucratic terror.

Rand's works are not easily digestible and they rarely registered an immediate impact. It took them many years to catch on, to amass more than a cult following. They combined sociology, political and social theory, history, and original if quirky characterizations that baffled but intrigued readers and viewers, who had little notion of the intellectual context that produced and motivated the writer. British and American critics frequently misinterpreted her novels, which are as lengthy and ponderous as the works of her early mentors—the writers and philosophers of Russia's Silver Age. It was rarely acknowledged or even grasped that Rand was a serious intellectual, erecting not only intricately structured plots and entertaining texts, but an entire system of social theory aimed at resolving the polarities of traditional Western dualism—a favorite Russian preoccupation. In fact the classic Russian characteristics of Rand's thought and work, obscured by her voluntary change of identity and rare reference to, if not outright avoidance of, her past, place her among the most anomalous and enigmatic of modern American writers.

Her biographers agree that Rand lived a life of internal conflict between the mask of objectivism and her real personal needs. As far as that goes, the record agrees. But to a considerable degree it must be acknowledged that she stood by her ideals despite professional, personal, and financial costs. Though a dependent of Hollywood, she never willingly manipulated the mass consumer. She respected common people too much (if mainly in the abstract). She took her chances insisting on control with book publishers and film producers, while suffering poverty and want. For advances or film rights anyone else in such cir-

cumstances would adopt any posture just to get the check! We are all conflicted and flawed, but how many entertainment entrepreneurs exhibit such integrity? Rand was an "entertainer" in the sense that she amassed a wide following and produced popular cartoon-like art. She was a hit with the media, but rarely appeared; during the 1960s she could have cashed in, and through influential admirers, she could have worked her way to an advantageous sinecure. She did none of these things, but lived independently, from the income of her painfully wrought works.

In certain respects, Ayn Rand was way ahead of the curve, and deserves more serious attention by both academic thinkers and students of American pop culture.

Notes

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 2000 [1994]), pp. 7–8, 60–78. "Only the temporary and bizarre alliance of liberal capitalism and communism in self-defense against this challenger saved democracy, for the victory over Hitler's Germany was essentially won, and could only have been won, by the Red Army" (p. 7). "It is one of the ironies of this strange century that the most lasting results of the October revolution, whose object was the global overthrow of capitalism, was to save its antagonist, both in war and in peace" (pp. 7–8).

[2] Martin Walker, *America Reborn* (New York: Knopf, 2000), pp. 341–42. Greenspan in 1947 was bass clarinetist in the Harry Jerome Swing Band in New York, before he became an Objectivist. See "The Undertaker Takes Over," in Jeff Walker, *The Ayn Rand Cult* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), pp. 203–218.

[3] Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1988), pp. 351–86; Paul Buhle, Dan Georgiakis, et al., *Encyclopedia of the American Left.*

[4] Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, pp. 6–7. Gabler may actually understate the role of the studios in the creation of the American mental landscape. In Gore Vidal's view, films produced the template on which the culture came to rest. American life is a product not of a specific social history, but of the American self-image in film. See *Screening History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 15–34.

[5] Kurt Johnson and Steve Coates, *Nabokov's Blues: The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Zoland Books, 1999). The four excellent, and very different, biographical works consulted are Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1986); Chris Sciambarra, *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* (Pittsburgh: Pennsylvania State University, 1995); Jeff Walker, *The Ayn Rand Cult*; and Michael Yang, *Reconsidering Ayn Rand* (Enumclaw, Wash.: Winepress, 2000).

[6] Peter Erickson, *The Stance of Atlas: An Examination of the Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (Portland, Ore.: Herakles Press, 1997), p. 70.

[7] Walker, *The Ayn Rand Cult*, pp. 47–99; Erickson, *The Stance of Atlas*, "Ayn Rand Versus Lenin," pp. 199–220.

[8] According to Berliner, she kept hundreds of letters from her family, but no copies

survive of her to them. These would make a remarkable chronicle. Michael Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), pp. 2–3.

[9] All contemporary political discourse now obtains between a right and a far-right. This dichotomy, within Jewish intellectuals or the larger American intelligentsia, is utterly arbitrary and relative, essentially a phantom of television (entertainment) rhetoric. The Depression era "Left"—a very weak coalition—has long departed. The 1960s counter-culture lent itself rapidly to commodification. No movement in the society has ever challenged the power structure or the premises of the capitalist mode. What the media now call the "left" is the decrepit corpse of 1950s liberalism, whose heirs in any other national context would be perceived as fascism with a smile. I follow here the analysis of E. Batalov, *The Philosophy of Revolt* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), and Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966 [1955]). What tenuous, faint-hearted opposition ever existed is surveyed in Paul Buhle and Dan Georgiakis, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left*. For Rand's position see Walker, *The Rand Cult*, 277–87.

[10] Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, p. 101.

[11] Though the October Revolution framed all external politics in the West for nearly a century, it was not a prerequisite for U.S. imperialism, which Mark Twain deplored in his essays from Hawaii (1888) and which was a manifestation of the culture's origins in African slave trade and Native American genocide. When the latitudinarian religious dissenter groups first colonized the American east coast, the construction of "Other" achieved a remarkable phase. Indians and blacks were perceived as a different and lesser order of being. A direct line runs from early colonial "controls" on "dangerous" populations to Fat Man, Little Boy, and Nixon's obliteration of Cambodia. American imperialists could not resist filling in as European empires were phased out in the period from World War I through the 1960s (hence Vietnam),with such enthusiasm that the idea of bombing entire countries off the map was perceived as a way of saving them from Communism/Soviet imperialism. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 160–204.

[12] The Tennessee State Law that prohibited the teaching of evolution in public schools was not repealed until 1967.

[13] Shortly after she emigrated, the American administration dropped bombs on Nicaragua, a distant, prostrate, and utterly insignificant Central American country.

[14] The passage of the 18th amendment, in force 1919–1933, prohibited manufacture and sale of alcoholic drink. It took yet another, the 21st, to reverse it. This is a strange use of the U.S. Constitution, considering that revising or amending it to affect actual public criminality (corporate air and water pollution, government deficit spending, military waste—practices far more problematic than beer) is beyond the Constitution's purview.

[15] Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, p. 101.

[16] Between 1938 and 1953, Beria, commissar of the Soviet secret police, carried out thousands of political executions. It's not clear Rand knew of this scene. Though Hoover did not execute anyone—directly—he spied on and interfered with citizens in numbers far exceeding Beria's victims, and initiated forms of blackmail, domestic terror, and invasive police-state tactics that baldly violated the Constitution. For details see David Wise, *The American Police State* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

[17] Except for Australia, America is the only country that is also a continent, with no

real borders to defend, and two vast oceans to isolate it on either side from Europe or Asia. With a population armed to the teeth and the world's largest constellation of natural resources and internal markets, the USA is impregnable. Yet, elites exploited the popular paranoia, drawing the masses into the Philippines, two world wars, Korea, and Vietnam. According to Rand's own formulation, the draft is coercive, "denying one the right to his own life," hence immoral and totalitarian. Yet, nothing of this is addressed by her. And of the preponderance of resources that U.S. taxpayers have laid out since 1945 (mainly unknowingly) for "defense," there is no mention.

[18] William F. O'Neill, *With Charity Toward None* (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield & Adams, 1972), pp. 14–15.

[19] Quoted in Brandon, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, p. 52

[20] Sciambarra, *The Russian Radical*, p. 88.

[21] Hardt and Negri make this point about capital in *Empire*.

[22] For a very concise review of what Rand, together with Western thinkers generally, had overlooked in terms of comparative East-West economic development, see Dick Goldstone, "Whose Measure of Reality?" *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 501–508; Dick Goldstone, "Economic Growth in World History: Rethinking the 'Rise of the West' and the Industrial Revolution," *Journal of World History* 13 (Fall 2002): 323–89; and Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[23] Walker, *The Ayn Rand Cult*, pp. 295–325.

[24] Douglas Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen, eds., *The Philosophical Thought of Ayn Rand* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1984).

[25] Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* (Los Angeles: Nash Pub. Corp., 1969). The volume was rereleased in a "32nd anniversary edition" (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

[26] John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1919); Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940). These largely forgotten tomes are exquisite representations of how the old Anglo-American Left perceived the early Revolution. Given the misery of much of the American population during the pre-1917 century, the quest for Utopia among the better educated is understandable. That it could never be realized through Lenin's vanguard party, or with the impatience and immediacy that Lenin demanded of social change, was not easily accepted by the American Old Left. Of these, John Reed was one who transcended rhetoric, participating in the October Revolution and dying in Russia for the cause. He is buried in the Kremlin wall, behind Lenin's tomb.